

## **These Bruises** by **movieholic**

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**Summary:** (Make for better conversation.)

# 1. Chapter 1

It isn't the screaming that woke him up, but the choking.

His own.

He physically jolts awake, eyes wild and wide as his hands paw at his throat as he realizes that *he can't breathe*. Panic presses against his chest, a heavy weight that he can't push away, and it sinks deeper and deeper until he can feel his heart painfully *thump, thump, thumping* against his rib cage.

He sits up, feet tangled in the linens kicked to the end of his bed, and hacks up what he can only assume is a mixture of drool and bile. He scrambles off the cot, falling bodily to the floor in his haste, and turns on the nearest lamp with such force that it threatens to topple off the end table. He stares at the mess on the sheets.

"Jesus," he croaks.

It's blood. His own blood.

He takes a step back, falters, and takes another. There's moisture tickling the hairs of his beard, just under his nostrils, and he swipes at it with the back of his hand. He can't stop the trembling of his fingers when he sees the smeared blood there too.

That's when the screams finally register.

He stumbles backward, away from the heinous sight before him, a name glued to the inside of his throat but unable to make it past his blood-flecked lips. His knee clips the couch as he rounds it, the promise of a bruise the least of his worries as he shoulders the closed, wooden door and barges into the room where the piercing noise is emanating from.

The sole light in the room flickers and hums loudly when he switches it on, but it's a blimp on his radar when he sees the young, slip of a girl sitting ramrod straight in her bed. Her thin hands are white-knuckling the comforter twisted around her legs, and her doe-like

eyes are oozing blood from the ducts. Her nose is a mess of maroon, and Hopper feels an odd urge to heave at the image.

The screams haven't stopped at his entrance. He crosses the room swiftly, grabs Eleven by her slim shoulders –

Hopper comes to a moment later. He's slumped against the wall opposite of the bed, and has the wherewithal to thank whatever deity prevented him from just going through it. He places a hand flat on the floor, and slowly pushes himself up until he's on his feet again. The room spins as he reaches behind his head, and touches a particularly sore spot just underneath his hair. There's a definitive bump, but there's no blood when he checks his quivering fingers.

The screaming has blessedly stopped, but the wet, shuddery sobs that follow aren't much a reprieve. Hopper staggers across the room, but pulls short at the side of her bed. He vehemently hates how suddenly tentative he is, so he takes the risk and hesitantly reaches out again. But this time it's clear that she's awake by the way she physically starts at his presence.

The crying doesn't stop as she nimbly untangles herself from the nest of blankets she ensconced herself in, and launches off the bed into his arms. He staggers, but holds her steadfast as the unexpected force of her weight pushes them toward the doorway. He braces his back against the door frame, and allows their combined heft to drag them to the floor.

He rakes a hand through her knotted curls, scratching blunt nails against her scalp with each pass, as he clutches her to his broad chest and murmurs through a husky mantra:

"It's okay. You're okay. You're okay. You're okay."

Over and over and over again.

The words are absorbed into the thick tendrils of her hair as he presses his lips against it. His eyes are clenched tight, so tight that he wonders how any tears manage to squeeze through at all, but they're there as evidenced by his damp, clumped eyelashes.

He doesn't realize right away that she's muttering right back through breathy sobs:

"It's not okay. Not okay. Not okay. Not okay."

His chapped lips crack as he pulls them back into a silent, open-mouthed cry of pain.

"You're right. I don't know what to do." He presses a firm kiss against her warm temple. "Tell me what to do," he begs, "Please. *Please*, tell me what to do. I can't lose you again. I *can't*." His large bulk shakes from the sheer force of his silent tears.

She can only reply in kind. She presses her lithe form impossibly closer, all but climbing inside his cleaved open chest, and violently trembles despite his fierce hold on her.

Hopper doesn't know how long they sit like that. Minutes? Hours? Could it be days? His back aches where the ridges of the door frame dig into his sore flesh. His left leg has gone numb, and his fingers twitch sporadically against the temples of Eleven's head.

Eleven, for her part, had essentially cried herself into a deep slumber against his chest. It's the only time he can think he's been envious of the young girl. She emits a soft hiccup, a stunted emanation of breath, every few seconds.

Dappled sunlight peeks through the half-slotted blinds in the room. Dust motes dance in the filtered beams; little speckles of gold in an otherwise gloomy space. It'd almost be beautiful, if it didn't illuminate the now brown blood staining the bed sheets.

Hopper takes a long, steadying breath and closes his stinging eyes. He's exhausted. A deep, unyielding kind of worn out that settles into his aching bones and rests there like dead weight. But he knows they can't continue to sit as they are.

So, with as little fanfare as possible, Hopper maneuvers his outstretched legs until he's able to get them underneath himself. He manages to keep the jostling to a minimum as he pulls the both off them from the cool floor. Eleven mews in protest at the movement,

but doesn't stir otherwise.

He doesn't hesitate this time. He knows exactly what his next step is going to be. He readjusts his grip on Eleven, crosses the cabin, and carefully opens the front door with her in his arms. The Blazer is already unlocked, but the short walk there is full of jagged rocks and sharp twigs cutting his bare feet. The pain is nothing at this point.

Hopper reaches into the backseat, snags a raggedy blanket, and gently wraps it around Eleven's sleeping form. He closes the door, and swiftly treks back to the cabin. He grabs his jeans from the back of the couch, and pulls them on. Socks and boots next, then a flannel and his jacket. He rushes into Eleven's room, ignoring the metallic tinge to the air, and grabs a pair of her own socks and her shoes before making his way back to the front of the cabin. He grabs his hat, turns and looks into the mess he's leaving behind, and shoves it firmly on.

He doesn't know how to explain himself when he shows up at Joyce's doorstep, disheveled and covered in blood, but he knows deep down that she can help.

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**TBC...**

**Please Review.**

## 2. Chapter 2

There's a sharp *tick, tick, ticking* of a clock somewhere down the darkened hallway. It's a staccato beat that keeps up with the rhythm of Hopper's heart. There's a creaking of a chair, and then a curtain of tangled brunette in his field of vision. He lifts his heavy brow, and meets Joyce's eyes warily.

"Hey, *there* they are." She continues to lean forward, and gently snags the cigarette that dangles loosely between his pursed lips. "I almost forgot that they were blue." She takes a deep pull from the stolen prize, and Hopper cants his head as he listens to the paper of the Camels audibly burn then disperse into flakes of ash. They fall to the tabletop, and Hopper's only half surprised that they don't sound like bombshells when they land. Neither party makes a move to brush them off.

She slowly exhales the smoke through her nostrils, and it curls around her thick hair as it rises. He expects her to hand the cigarette back, but she turns toward the table and puts it out in the ceramic ashtray by her elbow instead. He can physically feel the deep "v" carve itself in between his furrowing brow, but before he can say anything, she's extending her hand out to him. He looks down at the offered appendage in an exhausted daze, but takes it without question anyway.

"C'mon," she says softly. "El's cleaned up and taken care of. Let me take care of you now."

Hopper relents to being tugged down the hall without a word of protest. He doubts he'd be able to form words in his mind, much less speak aloud, with how hard his head is throbbing. Joyce gently pulls him into the bathroom, and he winces when she turns the light on. She notices, and gives him a sympathetic smile as she flicks it back off.

"We can make do without."

The space is cramped with Hopper's larger frame stuffed into it, but Joyce manages to get him to sit atop the closed toilet seat without

too much shuffling around. He stares blankly at the plastic shower curtain before him, as she grabs something out of his line of sight. He listens as the faucet is turned on, then off, and suddenly Joyce's wide-eyed expression of concern is before him again.

The dried blood around his nostrils peels when he questioningly croaks: "El?"

"She's fine," she assures him. He doesn't think that's the first time she's answered that question. There's a washcloth being pressed against his mouth, scrubbed underneath his nose, and dabbed at his earlobes. It's warm and soothing, and he feels himself leaning into it. "Almost done." There are dark, purple smudges underneath his half-lidded eyes, and he almost swears that's what she's trying to wipe away next, until he realizes that the droplets of water there aren't from the cloth. "It'll be okay," she whispers.

*It's okay. It's okay. It's okay.*

*It's not. It's not. It's not.*

He presses the thumb of his right hand into his left eye, digging the appendage into the giving flesh as if the pressure would ease the ache behind it. It doesn't. So, he lowers his head and unintentionally nudges Joyce's stomach with the crown of it. She threads a damp hand through the disheveled waves of his hair, and keeps it there when he doesn't object.

She stands there for a moment longer, silently offering whatever comfort he wanted to soak from her mere presence before carefully pulling away. She gives him a wobbly smile that he doesn't see, and moves to run the washcloth underneath the tap once more. When she returns, she's crouching in front of him.

"This might sting," she says apologetically. It does, whatever she's wiping over and under his exposed feet, but it's soothed when she follows it with the warm cloth. "Okay," she rises and offers him a tentative smile. "Can you stand?"

He didn't realize his mouth was already agape until he closes it to wet his chapped lips with his tongue. He nods in affirmation in lieu

of speaking, and allows her to steady him when he moves. The room spins less than it did earlier, but he still finds himself tilting to the side.

"Whoa there, Hop." She bodily pushes herself underneath his sweat-soaked armpit, but doesn't complain at the feeling. "I'm here."

Together, they exit into the hall, and shuffle towards her bedroom. In the doorway, Hopper hesitates, and she doesn't push. It takes a minute before he urges them forward again, and she simply follows. When they reach her bed, he's nudged until the back of his legs hit the mattress, and he sits heavily on the edge. The springs squeak in protest, but the frame doesn't collapse, and it's a minor miracle that Joyce silently celebrates within herself.

"You can stay here for as long as you'd like," she says as she walks back towards the door. "There's some water on the table there, and I'll be out here if you need anything. Get some rest, Hop."

"Stay."

"What?"

He's already lying on his side, but he's facing her, and he's looking at her like he's just seeing her for the first time since she opened the door to him that morning. He feels as if there's this great pressure pushing down on his weary body, and that if he can only soak in her buoyant company for just another moment that he may just be able to keep afloat a while longer.

So, he manages to repeat in a voice suddenly too thick, "Please. Stay."

It's out of character for him, he realizes. He doesn't normally plead, doesn't usually beg, and definitely doesn't allow himself to be vulnerable in front of others. He doesn't know if he's just feeling emotionally flayed, scrubbed raw and lay bare before her, or if he's just so exhausted that he can't seem to stop the words from slipping past his cracked lips, but he finds himself saying it again: "Stay."

She doesn't call him out on it, and he's grateful to her for it. He thinks she might've any other day. In fact, he *knows* so, but instead she gives



him an understanding yet tender smile and crosses the room until she's by his side. She guardedly lies next him, her back to his front, but isn't able to relax her body against his. This is different. This isn't the norm. This isn't the grin-and-bare-it style they've settled into since the Upside Down.

This is intimate.

This is-

"Okay?"

"What?" her reply is breathy in her befuddlement. She's tense with anxiety and confusion.

"Is this okay?" he's thrown his arm over her midriff, and the solid weight of it is more comfortable than it has any right to be.

"Yeah," she closes her eyes, and tries to match her breathing to his. It takes several minutes, but eventually she can feel herself relaxing in his hold. She thinks that maybe this doesn't have to be weird. This doesn't have to mean anything more than a friend comforting another friend. It doesn't.

"It doesn't always end up in death."

She stiffens, and realizes too late that she's the one that said it.

She's the one that made it weird.

The cold tip of his nose is pressing against her neck. His slow huffs of breath are tickling the wisps of hair at the base, and she can feel his thick drawl when he sluggishly replies: "Yeah."

He gets why she'd think that. It didn't for her. Not with Will.

It did for Sara.

It could have for Eleven.

Hell, after last night? It *still* could.

He closes his eyes, and feels his breath evening out until they're nothing more than soft, steady puffs of hot air against the nape of her exposed neck.

"Yeah, it does."

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**The End.**

**Thank you.**